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SBCC Continuing Education Students Unite

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Credit: Cathie McCammon and Eleanor Larson, ACES Co-Presidents

Concern over what is happening to Santa Barbara City College's Continuing Education program (Adult Ed) has prompted students to take action. As a first step we have formed a student association called ACES (Associated Continuing Education Students). Our Mission is to ensure that the non-credit Continuing Education is treated and managed with importance and fairness and to work toward making classes as affordable as possible, while at the same offering both variety and high quality courses to satisfy the needs of the community.

ACES membership is composed of a diverse group of students and spans differing age groups and occupations. Many of our members have taken a variety of classes over the years and all attest to the benefits that these have had in their lives. Membership is open to all continuing education students and we are continuingly hearing from more and more students.

Why did we decide to form this organization? We have taken this unprecedented action, because the administration has made it quite clear that they are no longer willing to be advocates of our continuing education program. They don't seem to appreciate that has been a unique treasure and community resource for over 50 years

There is a pervasive feeling shared by many students that not only is the current administration not interested in being an advocate for our classes, but the opposite is true. Actions are being taken to cut classes through a number of ways. Major policy decisions are being made at the top and it is quite clear that they do not want active participation by all the students and teachers despite state requirements for shared governance.

The majority of classes traditionally offered in the summer are not happening this year. However, if you look closely you will see some fee-based classes or enhanced classes, those the state reimburses at a higher rate, will still be taught. Lack of funds is the stated reason. However, no administration salaries are to be cut and they continue to be paid for a full 12 months and a vacant dean position is in the process of being filled. In addition, the school is unwilling to use their unprecedented reserves to restore classes that have been cut..

For the fall, we have been led to believe that more classes will be changed to fee-based, with the full costs of the classes being transferred to the student. Although some in the community can afford the fees, many cannot. The minimum number of students required for a class have been raised, and if the minimum is not met the class is cancelled.

Classes with teachers who leave or retire are not being replaced in a timely manner,

even though there are qualified teachers who have applied and are willing to teach their classes.

Classes that have been taught for a number of years are being changed to fee-based or cancelled due to technicalities. A supportive administration could and would promptly have rectified these problems. Other Continuing Education programs, such as San Diego and North Orange have done this for similar courses. These problems are not the fault of instructors or students, but they are the ones who are punished when the administration chooses to cut rather than advocate.

We are not alone. Many instructors have shared with us their frustration. They are told one thing one week only to have it changed the next.

The larger community is also concerned. Many members of the community have told us that they have been willing to put up with the problems of having a city college in their midst even though this creates parking problems in their neighborhood and students take up a disproportionate share of affordable housing, because of the wonderful classes continuing education provides to the community. For the same reason, many community members have been supportive of bond measures and have been generous in their contributions to the Continuing Education programs. They are now horrified to see these classes disappear.

It is indeed tragic to see what is happening now. Lack of transparency, lack of willingness to allow students any meaningful voice and perhaps most important, lack of passion or caring to fight to maintain the rich diversity of Continuing Education classes are now evident. These reasons have prompted students to assert themselves

There is an almost universal lack of credibility in the administration on the part of many students. Students have been asked for suggestions only to have them ignored. Information has been released in bits and pieces. One week students are told one thing only to have it changed the next. The lack of openness is overwhelming - it is truly sad that the administration appears more dedicated to cutting classes than saving them.

Good communication is needed now. Students are hungry for and need real information. Members of the Board of Trustees, in response to legitimate student concerns, dismiss them as being misinformed. What can they expect, from a lack of transparency and a refusal to provide complete and honest information. Credibility and trust have disappeared and it is not clear what major efforts are being made to restore them.

Students are not ignorant as to fiscal matters, but they are not willing to accept being told that you just don't understand. Students want to know what is happening with the budget. What is the state of SBCC's reserves and why are these in a growth mode when everyone else is suffering? We know the State is eager to make cuts whenever possible, but we do not believe that continuing education should bear a disproportionate share of these cuts. Without the provision of verifiable and correct information mistrust is rampant.

What has happened is that the administration and the Board of Trustees are no longer perceived as strong advocates of the life long learning that Continuing Education has provided over the years. It is not enough to blame the State. Things need to change and ACES hopes to be an agent of change. Openness and transparency are needed now if the situation is to be rectified. We are the canaries in

the coal mine and we do not intend to stop singing.

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